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The Provision of Information Services to Nigerians: Meeting the Challenges of 21st Century

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Introduction

The 21st Century falls within the epoch called the Information Age. The concept of the Information Age/Society epitomizes the changes brought about by technological advances and globalization (Dike, 2007; Oladele, 2008; Ogunsola, 2005) toward the end of the 20th Century. This epoch is characterized by speed and precision in the production, transfer, access, and use of knowledge (Chakrabarti, 2001). The information society, as a concept, "sums up the new world order where the position of nations, their power, wealth and influence, increasingly depends on their access to and ability to use information." (Dike, 2007). In fact, for any individual or group to navigate well in this increasingly complex age, information is essential. (Kochen and Donohue, 1976).

The provision of library and information services to Nigerians, therefore, is a *sine qua non*. Access to, and ability to use, information among Nigerians is the single most important factor by which Nigeria can remain the giant of Africa and achieve its dream to emerge among the twenty largest world economies by the year 2020.

This paper addresses the provision of Library and information services to Nigerians with particular reference to meeting the challenges of the 21st century. It is divided into four sections, namely; classification of information user communities, planning considerations, the challenges, and the way forward.

Classification of Information User Communities

The provision of library and information services to Nigerians presupposes that Nigeria is an information user community comprising different types of information user communities (Ochogwu, 2009), which can be classified. The information user community in Nigeria can be classified according to the following categories:-

a. *According to professional or vocational characteristics*, e.g., engineers, accountants, farmers, nomads, fishermen, miners, etc.

b. *According to institutional affiliation*, e.g., information user communities found in Universities, Polytechnics, Colleges of Education, Secondary Schools, Primary

Schools, etc.

c. *According to geographical location*, e.g., information user groups that reside in riverine areas, arid regions, the mountain range of Adamawa State, etc. People that reside in such locations may constitute heterogeneous user groups that have to be determined in order to be able to provide library and information services that would be relevant to them.

d. *According to some restrictions in terms of access*, e.g., people who are physically challenged; refugees; women in purdah; the mentally challenged; illiterates; etc. It is necessary to identify the information user communities because this is part of the process of diagnosing/analyzing their information needs without which the library and information services provided for them can not be customized.

Planning Considerations

A plan is a systematic attempt to organize future performance as it affects people, money or materials and services in the light of specified constraints and time frame (Hartzell, 2006). For any library and information provisions to be effective, they must be properly planned, and this involves a number of fundamental considerations, which include the following:-

1. Goals

Planning usually involves the determination of goals, and strategies for their attainment. The goals of providing library and information services to Nigerians must consider also the nature of the target clients; the acquisition, organization and dissemination of appropriate information to the different clienteles; different services for different user groups; library/ information professionals and other staff required to execute the service provision; as well as types of information sources and anticipated funding implications.

Contributions by Greer, Grover, and Fowler (2007) identified various categories of library and information professionals that are relevant to the provision of library and information services, which include: librarians, archive managers/archivists, information managers/information resource managers, information scientists/theorists, information systems specialists, knowledge managers, information entrepreneurs and records managers. The services of these professionals will need to be supported by those of sub-professionals and non-professionals. These latter categories also should be taken into account in the setting of goals. Ralph M. Edwards (1975) delineated the functions of professional, sub-professional and non-professional staff and the indispensable roles of each category to successful library and information service provisions.

2. Training and Education of Library and Information Personnel

Without the availability of the requisite staff, it is impossible to achieve a functional provision of library and information services to Nigerians. For this reason, it is imperative for schools of library and information science in the country to train information professionals who would appreciate the challenges facing Nigerians as clients in an information society, and to produce sufficient quantities of qualified information professionals that will be proactive and rise to the current challenges of providing library and information services to Nigerians. (Ochogwu, 2009).

3. Information Systems and Structures

Planning of library and information services for Nigerians should take cognizance of the various information systems and structures established to provide information to Nigerians. This is with a view to ensuring effective collaboration with them. The information systems and structures include print and electronic media houses, publishing houses, bookshops, archives, documentation centres, information centres, different types of libraries, Internet connectivity, CD-ROM

technology, etc.

4. Professional Knowledge of Information Professionals

Information professionals must possess professional knowledge and be able to apply it effectively in the planning and implementation of library and information services. (Greer, Grover and Fowler, 2007). The professional knowledge required of information professionals includes: information psychology, sociology of information, information organization management, and information engineering.

- a. *Information psychology*. This refers to how individuals seek, acquire, organize, process, utilize and store information.
- b. *Sociology of information*. This refers to how society and groups within society, create, produce, organize, disseminate, diffuse, preserve and discard information.
- c. *Information organization management*. This term concerns how to create and manage an organization designed to support and enhance the information transfer process.
- d. *Information engineering*. This terminology refers to how to design databases of library collections, and other information systems customized to meet the needs of a target user (Greer, Grover and Fowler, 2007) have drawn particular attention to information psychology, due to its value in the consideration of diagnosis as a basis for customization of the provision of library and information services that will be relevant to the target information users.

5. Diagnosis and customization

This is another fundamental planning consideration that can enhance the effectiveness of the library and information services provided. It eliminates waste of resources associated with library provisions, which are not customized. To be relevant, the library and information services provided must be founded upon a diagnosis of the needs of the target user community (Agada, 1999.; Greer, Grover and Fowler, 2007; Ochogwu, 2009) and evaluation of the existing library and information services, for individuals. For groups of information users, the corresponding terms used are: analysis, recommendation, implementation and evaluation (Agada, 1999).

Diagnosis/analysis involves identifying different variables which include:

- a. *Knowledge of the actual and potential information users*
- b. *The users' demographic characteristics* , e.g., age, gender, marital status, religion, etc.
- c. *Cultural, economic and political activities*
- d. *Business*
- e. *Education*
- f. *Settlement patterns*

After identifying the information needs of the user(s) via diagnosis/analysis, the next stage is to customize the provision of the library and information services. Customization involves:

- a. *Providing the resources that will meet the diagnosed/analyzed needs* in the preferred packages , e.g., in book form, microform, CD-ROMs e.t.c.
- b. *Evaluating or assessing the services provided*. The essence of evaluation is to enable the information provider and funding agency ascertain the extent to which

the services rendered are meeting the needs of the user(s), in order to discard those information packages and services which are irrelevant and not needed. Thus, the results of evaluation serve as guidelines to the information provider in applying necessary remedial measures, which help to develop information services that meet the needs of the target information users.

Challenges

There are several challenges associated with the provision of library and information services to Nigerians in the 21st Century, which have to be met. These challenges include the following:

1. The Nature of Professional Practice. Three types of library and information practitioners have been identified in Nigeria: passive, reactive, and assertive. (Ochogwu, 2007).

The passive library and information professionals are those professionals who concentrate on the acquisition and processing of information resources as a matter of routine, with little or no regard to use. Meeting the needs of the users is not their concern. Majority of the library and information practitioners in Nigeria fall in this category of passive professionals.

The reactive ones are the library and information professionals who only respond to queries. They are not concerned with potential users who do not ask questions nor go to the library /information system.

The third group, the proactive ones, is a small minority group which consists of those professionals who care to diagnose/analyze the needs of the information users/ user groups, and customize their services to them. The tragedy for Nigeria is that for as long as the proactive library and information professionals remain the small minority in the country, so long will library and information services continue to elude Nigerians, no matter the human and material resources invested into the provision of library and information services to Nigerians.

2. Elitist and Urban Centred Nature of Services. The nature of library and information services is such that the services are largely elitist and urban centred. All types of libraries - national, public, academic and special libraries- which exist in the country, bear little or no focus on rural dwellers, nomads, the destitute, fishermen, market women, truck pushers, artisans, lumber men, physically and mentally challenged persons, senior citizens, toddlers, convicts, the sick, women in purdah, prostitutes, long distance drivers, pilots, the military, etc.

3. Availability and Accessibility of Library and Information Resources. In contrast to the information glut or "information overload" being experienced by the developed countries, there is prevalent lack of availability and accessibility of library and information resources in Nigeria, which reflects the state of affairs in most developing countries. Thus, the developing countries in general are inflicted with "information poverty" due largely to the failure of library and information professionals to provide access to these resources. Poor indexing, abstracting and bibliographic work are evident. (Ochogwu, 2007).

4. Poor state of Library and Information Services. There is virtual absence of library and information services in many Nigerian educational, business, political, social and economic institutions. A look at most of the secondary schools, primary schools, public libraries, and even some academic libraries and branches of the national library in the country are enough cause for concern to any proactive information professional.

5. Politics and Economics of Library and Information Services. As compared to other professions in the country like education, medicine, law and engineering, librarianship lacks a political base; it is yet to integrate itself into the country's

cultural and socio-political process. Despite the fact that every profession and vocation needs information, rarely is the provision of library and information service in Nigeria an issue of political campaign by elective office seekers. The demands for, and value/ appreciation of library and information services are low.

6. Poor Funding. Poor funding is not limited to library development but also affects library education, resulting in inadequate preparation of library and information professionals in the country.

7. Lack of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Tools and Compliance. Apart from the fact that many library and information professionals, support staff and users lack ICT compliance and ICT education, many library and information systems in the country lack ICT devices and tools. This is due to largely to poor funding, arising partly from lack of appreciation of libraries and librarians.

This state of affairs has given rise to the lack of technologically-driven library and information services, resulting in the prevalent inefficient and outdated library and information resources and services.

8. Negative Disposition of User Communities. Another major challenge to the provision of library and information services to Nigerians currently is the negative disposition of the information user communities themselves toward library and information services.

9. Poor Information Literacy. Part of the explanation for negative disposition of information user communities in the country toward library and information services relates to poor information literacy culture among the user communities in various respects which include:

- i. Lack of awareness of information needs,
- ii. Lack of awareness of information systems,
- iii. Lack of knowledge or skills to exploit the information systems,
- iv. Inability to evaluate accurately the information at hand, and
- v. Poor knowledge of ICT infrastructure and utilization.

10. Dearth of Research. Of note, too, is lack of adequate research into professional practice, library education and training. This is attributed largely to the situation where majority of the information professionals in Nigeria fall into the categories of passive or reactive practitioners, leaving only a minority as assertive or proactive group. (Ochogwu, 2009).

The Way Forward

1. Proactive Approaches

The strategies for meeting the current challenges to providing library and information services to Nigerians begin with the library and information professionals themselves. These professionals must vigorously adopt proactive approaches to library and information provisions. It is their responsibility to correct the prevailing unhealthy state of library and information practice, which is predominantly passive or reactive. Library and information professionals must appreciate the fact that the prestige enjoyed by professions like law, engineering, medicine and accounting did not come by chance but as a definite product of proactive toils and sweat of successive generations of professionals in those other fields. The prestige which society accords any profession reflects the value which, in the society's opinion, the profession delivers to it in form of qualitative, indispensable service. Library and information service provided in Nigeria,

therefore, must cease to be a mere product of professional chores and reflect the needs of the target user groups. Such proactive approaches can assume various dimensions. The dimensions include:

a. *Diagnosis and customization*

Library and information professionals, like physicians or any other professionals, must diagnose the information needs, plan and then implement the service which meets these needs. They should evaluate performance periodically in the light of the needs in order to take any necessary corrective measures and ensure the needs of the user groups are being met adequately by the services rendered. This "service cycle" for library and information professionals as extensively discussed (Greer, Grove & Fowler, 2007), based upon an earlier model by Robert Grover (Agada, 1999), and is accomplished at two levels -with individuals and with groups of users. Diagnosis and customization is a requirement for all types of library and information systems and all categories of Nigerians irrespective of social, political and economic status, and geographical location. And for every target user or user group, the library and information professional is thus armed with details of information needs (Katz, 1992) such as:

- Kind of information needed
- Packaging format
- Quantity required , e.g., a simple fact book, a book, an index, etc
- Level of sophistication of the sources required
- Purpose for which information will be used
- When and for how long the information will be used

b. *Research into Professional Education and Practice.* ;

There is need for continuous research into various aspects of professional practice in order to develop a formidable theoretical and knowledge base for the profession. Most of the research in librarianship today is said to be uneven in quality and weak in terms of methodology. (Busha & Harter, 1980). Such areas of professional activity in need of

researching into include: collection development, cataloguing & classification, reference service, user education and the value of the research done based upon experienced evidence of its use toward improving practice.

c. *Visibility of Library and Information Professionals*

There is relative obscurity, and consequent obvious lack of prioritization of library and information services, in the country. This situation calls for urgent measures to enhance the visibility of library and information professionals and services. Such measures include: active participation of professionals in politics, and promotion activities, like media encounters, publicity for services, and professional activities at local and international levels,

d. *Improved Planning*

Planning for the provision of library and information services must be done strategically. It must also exhibit innovation and creativity, taking into account not only existing needs but also anticipated future requirements associated with growth and increasing modernization. These considerations relate to all aspects concerning the services -staffing, information sources, infrastructure and funding.

2. User Education. Every library and information system must plan and implement appropriate user education strategies for its users. This will help to address the problem of poor information literacy among the user communities and promote demand for, and effective use of, the library and information services provided.

3. Library Cooperation. Library and information organizations need to pool their resources together in form of consortia and networks to guarantee mutual exploitation of their resources, and access to resources that may not be held in

their collections.

4. Professional Education and Training. Institutions for education and training of library and information professionals should improve and expand their programmes so as to produce larger numbers of well trained people who would be proactive in the provision of library and information services. The paltry 5120 registered librarians for a population of 140million Nigerians today translate into a ratio of a mere one librarian to about 27,000 Nigerians, which is grossly inadequate! (Ochogwu, 2009).

5. Improved funding. Funding is a fundamental requirement without which a library and information organization can not provide the requisite staff, information resources, infrastructure and overhead cost. Adequate funding is therefore an overriding imperative for any meaningful provision of library and information services.

6. Integration into Development Programmes & Services. One way of boosting and thus overcoming the challenges to providing library and information services in Nigeria is to integrate such services with the various development programmes and services. Ready examples are: the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (UN MDGs), World Bank Loans, National Development Plans, the Education Trust Fund (ETF), etc.

The Nigerian Library Association should champion the integration of library and information services campaign strategies by politicians.

7. Active Private Participation. Active private participation would boost the provision of library and information services. Oil companies, industrial concerns, Non-Government Organizations, private individuals, etc are all potential sources of funding for library and information services, which should be tapped.

Conclusion

Information is an essential requirement for the development of any nation. The provision of library and information services to Nigerians is a positive step toward making information widely available to the people to access and use to develop the country. The numerous challenges identified in connection with this endeavour can be surmounted through the strategies enumerated, of which proactive actions by the library and information professionals themselves are key.

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